Coaching versus managing in Agile

In the previous video, we learned about the importance of an Agile coach. In this reading, we will further explore the work of a coach and how it differs from that of a manager.

Both managing and coaching play important roles in project management. The difference in each approach is in communication. Management is about giving direction, while coaching is about teaching. Some situations will call for coaching, and others will call for management. As a project manager, it is important that you understand when each skill set is necessary for success.

Managing

So far, we have focused on the responsibilities of project managers. We know that project managers are tasked with delivering a project objective and solving problems as they arise. Project managers keep team members organized and on track. They streamline communication and give directions. This is very indicative of a traditional management approach. At its core, managing requires overseeing the work of others and can include:

- Onboarding and orienting new employees
- Conducting meetings
- Delegating tasks and assignments
- Monitoring progress and performance against those tasks
- Making high-level decisions

In Agile project management, however, teams are designed to be self-managing. A self-managing team has the autonomy to choose how best to accomplish their work, rather than being directed by others from the top down. Agile team members should also feel empowered and equipped to problem-solve on their own.

Even so, there are some cases where the decisive action of a manager is required. Examples include if there is an emergency that needs immediate action, if you are behind on a deadline, or if a client has very specific needs and you are the most familiar with them. In a results-driven project with little room for error, someone needs to step in and take the lead. That is where a managing approach comes in.

Coaching

Although managing seems inherent to project management, coaching is also an important part of the project management role.

Coaching is a two-way communication style aimed at influencing and developing team members' skills, motivation, and judgment. Coaching empowers team members to arrive at solutions on their own by teaching them critical thinking and decision-making skills. This is achieved through offering feedback and providing opportunities for professional development. When challenges arise, coaches will offer guidance, then get out of the way. Coaches don't jump in during times of crisis in a way that a manager would. Coaches ask questions to help team members arrive at conclusions on their own.

Coaches trust that their team members can make smart decisions, and trust can go a long way. When team members feel trusted, workplace satisfaction increases, and the quality of work improves.
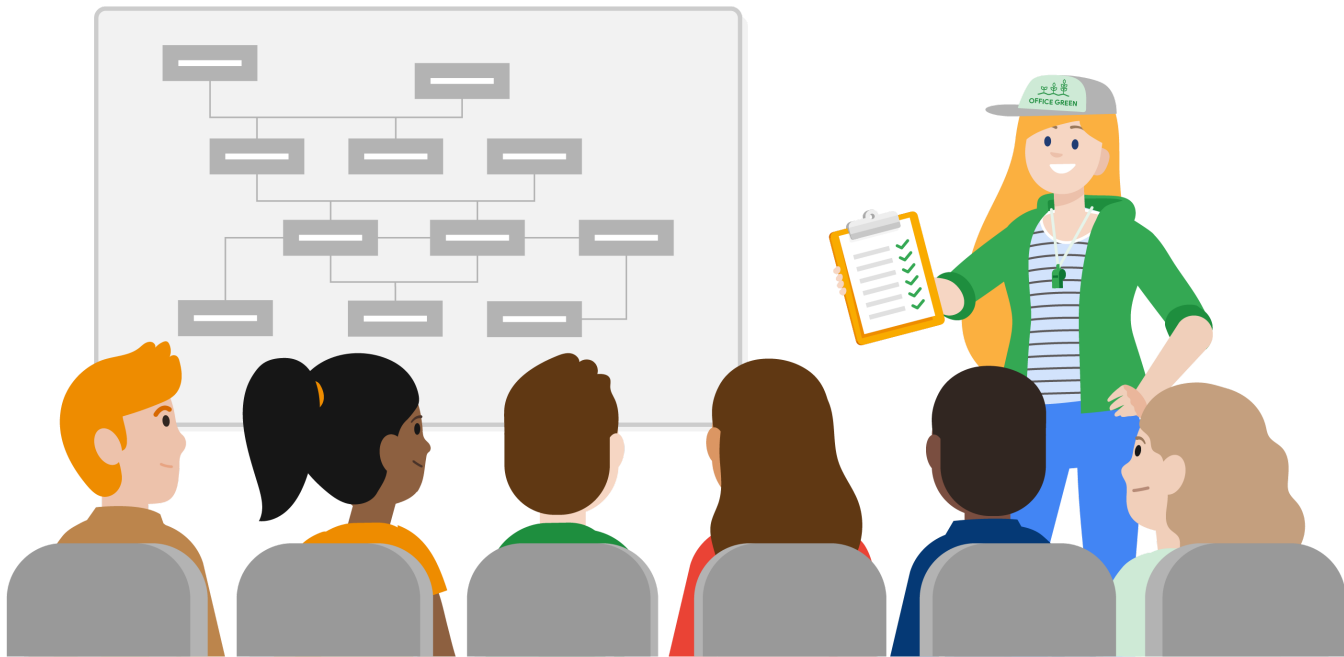
It is appropriate to use a coaching approach when a team member already has experience working on similar projects and is working on growing new competencies or is trying a new approach for the first time. Coaching is about building confidence and capabilities so that individuals can continuously grow and improve. There are a few principles to keep in mind when coaching:

1. **Motivate**: Coaches motivate team members to take action. They point out the value in others' work and instill within them a sense of pride in what they do.
2. **Support:** Coaches are an accessible resource for their team to come to when they experience problems or if they have an idea they want their feedback on.
3. **Encourage and appreciate:** When someone on their team is struggling with a heavy workload, a coach will acknowledge and validate the weight of their efforts and assure them that they are capable of handling the challenges ahead.

Coaching is appropriate in many circumstances, especially when you need to build up the confidence of an individual or a team. The most effective leaders strike a healthy balance between managing and coaching based on the needs of the situation, individual, and project they are leading. Examples of where coaching would be helpful include when a team member is branching out into using a new technology or discipline that will turbocharge their career opportunities, when an individual's behavior is having unintended consequences on the team dynamics that are not readily visible, or if a team is recovering from a setback.

Here's a scenario where a project manager or Scrum Master should step in to coach a team: Imagine a Scrum team has failed to launch a product that meets the customer needs Sprint after Sprint. The Product Owner continues to communicate to the team that the features are not quite right, and they need to rework the product in the next Sprint or release. The team feels deflated, and they are showing signs of burnout because they keep working on the same three features. Here is a perfect opportunity to do some coaching with the whole team. Consider bringing them together for a working session and cycle through all three principles of coaching:

1. **Motivation:** Ask the team to brainstorm positive reasons why the customer is providing this feedback and why it matters to create an excellent end product.
2. **Support:** Work with the team to capture ideas on how to streamline the customer feedback process, such as a design Sprint with the customer in attendance.
3. **Encourage and appreciate:** Set up an event where the team celebrates the work they have accomplished so far, and make the event fun and inclusive for all team members.

Key takeaway

Managing and coaching are distinct leadership approaches that each yield different results, and both styles require effective communication. A managing style typically utilizes one-way communication to assign tasks and give directives. Coaching relies on open communication in both directions to help develop an employee's or team's skills, so they can become self-sufficient. Some team members and company cultures will naturally favor one style over another, but both are necessary leadership skills. As an Agile project manager or Scrum Master, you will use both styles. That said, in Agile and Scrum, a coaching style is usually the best initial option since it will increase the capabilities of the team, leading to more agility over time.

When deciding which approach to use, ask yourself:

1. What is the desired outcome?
2. What is the skill level of the team member who has encountered a problem?
3. What does the situation need now to reach the desired outcomes?

For further reading on coaching with Scrum values, check out this blog post ⧉ from Scrum.org.

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